Ruwanweliseya: The Gem Of Sanctity

Posted on



The mesmerising view of the Ruwanweliseya from far

Standing majestically in the hallowed precincts of the Anuradhapura Sacred City is the Swarnamali Stupa, the emblem of sanctity, blessed with the presence of the Buddha and venerated by gods, great kings and Buddhists for over centuries and beyond.

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The immaculate dagaba reaching to the cloud laden sky appeared almost like part of the sky, harmonising with the spiritual and celestial worlds above. The Ruwanweliseya enshrined with the sacred relics of the Buddha evokes reverence and instills a sense of tranquillity in the hearts of the Buddhist devotees converging on the sacred site.



Built by King Dutugemunu, a devout Buddhist and the benevolent ruler of the country in 137 BC, the Stupa is also known as Swarnamali Seya, Ratnamali Chetiya and the Maha Thupa. The name denotes ‘sand of gems’, probably owing to a large extent of invaluable gems, gold, pearls and silver contained in the Stupa.

Apart from its material treasures the Swarnamali Chetiya is venerated and has become a pinnacle for Buddhists all round the world as it contains the largest portion of relics from the pyre of the sacred body of the Buddha. According to the ancient chronicle Dhatuwamsa, one eighth of the whole-body-relics of the Buddha has been deposited in the Stupa making it one of the treasured places of worship

for Buddhists.

The largest Stupa built for the first time in the ancient world being 300ft in height and with a diameter of 370ft is indeed a testimony to ancient Sri Lankan architectural prowess fused with devotion. Encompassing excellent architectural features in its construction the magnificent Stupa is a tribute to the thoughtfulness of its creator and the Enlightened One who conquered the truth.



1. The ancient stone stages on which the flowers are offered to the Stupa 2. Traces of the paintings are still visible on the Wahalkada 3. Ruins of the ancient Wahalkada on the West

Architectural Marvel

Entering through the main gate on the East, one is greeted by finely carved pun kalas and lion figures. There are three other entrances from three directions to enter the sandy compound. It ends with the magnificent Tusker Wall with 338

elephant figures embedded in.

The stone podium is situated inside the Tusker Wall sprawling over five acres. It is carpeted with smooth granite slabs which were designed to drain the rainwater adding another distinction to the hallowed site.

The four retinue dagabas facing the four sub directions inside the stone podium appear as venerating the immaculate Swarnamali Chetiya which is located in the middle of the inner compound filling hearts with awe and devotion.

The stupa built in the shape of a giant water bubble depicting the concept of impermanency in Buddhism reflects the essence of Buddhism in its structure.

The glistening koth kerella, the sacred golden pinnacle of the dagaba holds the crest gem, which is made of crystal, out to the sky in the way the ultimate truth – Nirvana – stands above the rest.

Of the four structures, the Wahalkada adorned with carvings of lions, tuskers, horses, cattle, lotus and kalpa wruksha – the wish conferring tree, the one on the west side is restored to its ancient stage. Faint traces of the paintings done during ancient times are still alive on this Wahalkada.

The Shrine Room built facing East has four Buddha statues: Kakusanda, Konagama, Kashyapa and Gautama and Maitree Bodhisatva sculptured in the verandah. Statues of the King Dutugemunu and Chola King Elara are placed inside the shrine room. A spectacular marble footprint of the Buddha adorned with 108 auspicious marks is a rare sacred footprint stone found in the world.



Seeking solace in Dhamma, the vast stone podium provides an ideal platform for meditation

The 18 riyana (measurement of acient times) long Buddha statue depicting the pirinivan manchakaya – passing away bed of the Buddha – is another heartening creation and a seated statue of the Buddha made of granite placed in a chamber on the left of the shrine room is painted according to ancient tradition.

Near the main entrance the statues of King Dutugemunu and his mother Queen Viharamahadevi and King Bhatikabhaya worshipping the Stupa have been built.



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Heavenly Picture

The stone slab inscription close to the shrine room explains the religious splendour and royal patronage conferred upon the great Stupa. The inscription describes a grand offering to the Swarnamali Chetiya by King Nissankamalla by spreading pearls on the sandy compound, offering flowers, silver and gold on it and lighting lamps with aromatic oils for seven days. The gods who were pleased with his offerings talked to him in this compound itself.

The two large tanks built close to the Stupa for preparing for the annual traditional lime washing bring to mind the colourful picture of the ceremonial event with people mounted on flexible bamboo ladders laid on the stupa and painting it with lime. The task requires a large amount of raw material – tons of lime, bags of salt, several numbers of bamboo trees and ropes.

Jewel From History

The ancient chronicle Thupawamsa says the site on which the Stupa is built was sanctified by the sacred touch of all four Buddhas. When Arahant Mahinda Maha

Thera scattered a bunch of Jasmines there the land trembled, as the Swarnamali Maha Chetiya was going to be built on that site.

According to folklore, a beautiful goddess named Swarnamali was dwelling in the Ran Thelambu tree in the site. She agreed to leave the site only after King Dutugemunu agreed to build the Stupa in her name.

Thupawamsa mentions that King Dutugemunu did not have enough means to build the Stupa. The King of Gods – Sakradeva came to know the King's intention and got God Vishvakarma to create all material required for construction including gold, pearl and silver, gems from different parts of the country.

Finally the construction started on an auspicious day, Vesak Full Moon day. It says that a very large number of arahant bhikkus from all four directions of the world attended the ceremony. The architect of the Stupa was said to be Arahant Indragupta Thera. As the ancient chronicle re-cords it, the foundation of the Stupa was sunk nine times to the earth.

Before construction came to an end, Emperor Dutugemunu was drawing his last breath and King Saddatissa covered the Stupa with a white cloth to show the completed view of the Stupa to the dying Emperor.

Miracles Performed

The ancient chronicles state that the Buddha's sacred relics deposited in Ramagama in India were brought by 16- year-old novice monk Sonuttara. Sacred relics of the Buddha assumed the appearance of the living Buddha and performed a great miracle emitting fire and water at the same time when the relics were deposited at the Stupa.

Today the great Ruwanweliseya stands resilient being a symbol of purity and perfection to all Buddhists seeking solace in the Dhamma of the Lord Buddha. At the threshold of the 2600th year of the Sambuddha Jayanti the ultimate significance of the Swarnamali Stupa is worth recalling.

2600th Sambuddha Jayanti
This year marks the 2600th year since the enlightenment of the Buddha with the Sambuddha Jayanti. The attainment of Nirvana and Buddhahood by the Siddhartha

Gauthama is recalled by Buddhists all over the world with profound veneration.

As the Maha Parinibbana Sutta of the Diga Nikaya describes, at the end of 5,000 years of Gauthama Buddha Rajjaya, the sacred relics of the Buddha enshrined in the Swarnamali Stupa will rise to the sky and the balance of the relics will arrive from other places in the world, and they will take the appearance of the living Buddha and perform the miracle of emitting fire and water at the same time, which is known as Yamaka Maha Pelahara before disappearing from the universe.